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## Re-creating Homeland in The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most widely known and celebrated poets of India is Jayanta Mahapatra. He has been an influence on a number of contemporary Indian English poets and brought recognition to this new genre by being the first ever recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry in 1981 for his book of verse, *Relationship*. *Relationship* is set in Odisha where Mahapatra has glorified the rich landscape and culture of the eastern coast. The sun and the soil of Odisha, his homeland, shine in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra. Puri, Konark, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar form a quadrangle in Mahapatra's poetry. Legends, myths and history associated with these places form the core of his poetry. Poems such as "Indian Summer Poem", "Evening in an Orissa Village", "The Orissa Poems", "The Indian Poems" and "The Indian Way" reveal his Indian sensibility. The themes of his poetry are varied – love, sex, death, tradition, rituals and contemporary reality. My paper makes a humble attempt to explore the concept of 'Homeland' explored in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra.

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Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the first Indian English poets to be honoured both at home and abroad. Though he started writing poetry after reaching forty, his volumes of work made him a recognised face world over. His first book of verse, *Close the Sky Ten by Ten* was published in 1971. His other volumes of verse include *Svayamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *The False Start* (1980), *Relationship* (1980), *Life Signs* (1983), *Dispossessed Nests* (1986), *Selected Poems* (1987), *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988), *Temple* (1989), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992), *Shadow Space* (1997), *Bare Face* (2000) and *Random Descent* (2005). According to K Ayyappa Paniker, the recurring images in Mahapatra's poems reveal that he is an Oriya to the core. Mahapatra is a poet of the soil. The eastern coast of India is glorified in his poems. Mahapatra has chosen for his themes various subjects beginning from landscape of the country to international problems. A poet's response to his landscape, his tradition and culture of his birthplace go to form his identity. To quote Judith Wright:

Before one's country can become an accepted background against which the poet's and novelist's imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described as it were, absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can confidently turn to its human figures (qtd in Kohli "Landscape and Poetry").

Jayanta Mahapatra's poems reverberates with the landscape of his home state, Orissa. In his two poems titled, "Dawn at Puri" and "Main Temple Street, Puri", Mahapatra talks about the importance of Puri and what it means to Hindus in our country. Widows believe dying at Puri will lead them to salvation. To quote from "Dawn at Puri":

her last wish to be cremated here  
twisting uncertainly like light  
on the shifting sands.

In another poem, "The Temple Road, Puri", Mahapatra describes the sea of common place who go to visit Lord Jagannath Temple at Puri and form of their prayer. The poet describes:

Later,  
as the shrine's skeins of light  
slowly close their eyes,  
something reaching into them  
from that place they learn to bear  
the lame lamp post  
to the huge temple door,  
the sacred beads in their hands  
gaping  
at the human ground.

Not only Puri, but also Konark, Bhubaneswar and Cuttack occupy important places in Mahapatra's poetry as they symbolise the tradition of ancient Orissa and her heroic past. Poems like "Indian Summer", "Evening in an Orissa Village", "The Orissa Poems", "The Indian Poems", "The Indian Way" are some of the poems of Mahapatra which display his Indian sensibility. Mahapatra's love for his homeland is reflected in his Sahitya Akademi Award receiving speech:

To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind knees over the grief of the River Daya and where the waves of Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konark, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship.

A search for one's root is a trend seen not only in the works of Jayanta Mahapatra, but also other modern Indian English poets like A.K Ramanujan and R Parthasarathy. His Sahitya Akademi Award winning book of verse, *Relationship* is Mahapatra's quest for his root:

For the poet, the Orissan landscape is the objective setting of his mental evolution, the phases of which get mixed up with the lyrical vocabulary of a humanist creed. The poem being set in Orissa embodies the myth and history of the land. As the conflicting principles of man and nature, history and autobiography and faith and suffering interact against the vast panorama of Orissan landscape, the poem shows a dialectical progression where every synthesis in further analysis turns into a thesis. (Das 40).

The poet's heart throbs for his homeland and he feels a part of the heroic tradition of his land. Cuttack, his home city, has a great historical past, but for the poet, it is now a symbol of 'vanquished dynasties'. The poet is overwhelmed by this and in an emotional voice says:

Now I stand among these ruins  
waiting for the cry of a night bird  
from the river's far side  
to drift through my weariness.... (*Relationship*)

In the first section of *Relationship*, references are made to River Mahanadi, Konark Temple, the ancient harbours of Chilika and Chandipur. There are references to the Kalinga War of 261 B.C. in which the great emperor Ashoka massacred thousands of Oriyas at Dhauli, near River Daya. The emperor had a change of heart and turned into a deeply religious man

when he saw the Daya River turned red with the blood of the vanquished.

In quite a few poems, Mahapatra turns to his family history to establish his link with the past. Like Kamala Das's grandmother, Mahapatra's grandfather had a huge influence on him. In a poem called, "Grandfather", Mahapatra dives deep into his family history and reflects the basic issues of life including change of religion. During the Orissa famine of 1866, his grandfather, Chintamani Mahapatra embraced Christianity driven by hunger. This was a calamity suffered by our people in the past and the turn their lives took as a result of this. The poet feels it is important to know the factors which forced them to change their faith instead of blaming them:

We wish we knew you more,  
we wish we knew what it was to be, against dying,  
to know the dignity.

*(Grandfather)*

Mahapatra also writes about the contemporary life and situation, and does not mince words in describing socio-political scene that affects humanity. In a poem titled, "Afternoon" (published in *HIMAL* 12/8 August 1999), Mahapatra expresses his aversion and agony at the rape incidents frequently reported in the newspapers. He writes:

The harsh afternoon skin of the summer sky  
lies in flakes on the dry river bed.  
There, the raped and dismembered body  
of another thirteen-year old girl, stilled,  
beyond the trembling of the sands.

*(Afternoon)*

Gandhi has become a symbol of justice and honesty and an apostle of peace. He has become a major subject of post-colonial literature. Mahapatra tried to create a contemporary myth out of Gandhi. In the poem "Requiem", Section XII begins with a statement:

You became the red earth  
that a perfect, constant gravity  
achieved through the aeons.

Mahapatra talks about love and sex in an uninhibited way in his poems. His poem, "Hunger" depicts a situation where a hungry father is forced to pimp his daughter to a sex-hungry tourist. Here, the word 'hunger' has both literal and symbolic meaning. Deeply rooted in the traditions of Orissa, Mahapatra makes use of religious imagery and symbols in his poetry. 'Rain' is an important symbol in Mahapatra's poetry. In his poem, "Rains in Orissa", the poet describes the rainy season in Orissa, his homeland, in an artistic way:

The sky's face expressionless.  
An oriole call echoes away in the sullen grayness,  
the book of earth throbs with the light of things  
A pond heron floats wearily in a rainpool.

*(Rains in Orissa)*

'Rain' is an old symbol used in our ancient literatures for fertility, life and sometimes for separation in Mahapatra's poetry. It is also a metaphor of life for Mahapatra. To quote the poet:

In the end  
I come back to the day and to the rain.

*(In the Fields of Desolate Rice)*

Apart from the symbols, myths too form an important part of Mahapatra's poetry. He has employed the myth of his native land, i.e. 'the golden deer' of the epic, *The Ramayana* in *Temple* to explain the concept of 'Laxmanrekha' (the limits beyond which one should not go.). Mahapatra's poetry is enriched with thought provoking images and dynamic symbols that change with the times. To quote Bruce King:

While Mahapatra's world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire and moments of renewal, his environment is filled with symbols of belief by the ordinary lives of the people of Cuttack, the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments. The poems are varied attempts to bridge an epistemological, phenomenological gap to know, be part of, experience, with the world and the other, whether it be a woman, temple stones, a Hindu priest. (King 206)

Mahapatra recognises the importance of imagery in his poetry. His poetry is both thought-oriented like Ezekiel's and image-oriented like Ramanujan's. Hence, one has to take both the connotative and denotative meanings of the words in order to understand his poetry. That's why Mahapatra's poetry appear to be difficult, multifarious and ambiguous. Mahapatra views the world objectively and portrays the issues without camouflaging them. With the help of symbols in his poetry, Mahapatra tries to evoke the native tradition and myths of his land. He writes poetry 'keeping India in his bones' (Das, *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra* 42).

Mahapatra tries to integrate his personal life with the contemporary situation. He uses the coloniser's language (i.e English) to convey his indigenous tradition. Some other poets who emphasised their locales were Whitman (nineteenth century New York), Robert Frost (New England), W.B Yeats (Sligo) and Nissim Ezekiel (Bombay). In a similar vein, Mahapatra glorified his locale – the golden triangle (Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Puri). Mahapatra was a bilingual poet and wrote in his native language, Odia too. His autobiography, *Bhor Motira Kanaphoola* was published in Odia language, chronicling the myriad experiences in his life that shaped his career as a poet of international standing.

Mahapatra's poetry derives its strength from the juxtaposition of the concrete and the abstract. One gets a feel of 'a unified sensibility' in his poetry. Mahapatra's poetry takes the past into its range, inculcates it with the present and looks forward to the future. History, myth and a vision for the future – all are embodied in his poetry. Hence, the poetry of Mahapatra can be called as both 'Modern' and 'Post-Modern' for it is imbued with the features of both. Like his fellow post-colonial poets A. K. Ramanujan and Shiv K Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra is a translator too. Some of his translated works include *Song of Kubja and Other Poems* (1981), *Verticals of Life: Poems* (1996), *Tapaswini: a Poem* (1998) and *A Time of Rising (Poems)* (2003). He was the Editor of the trailblazer magazine, *Chandrabhaga*, which was devoted to poetry, and was one of its kind in the country.

As Mahapatra advanced in years, he felt more for the suffering humanity. In a poem titled, 'Defeat', Mahapatra speaks of child labour and the plight of a boy who worked in the blacksmith's shop. In a tone full of pathos, Mahapatra says:

The blacksmith's shop is gone now  
and childhood sits in shadow  
like an eye in a face that is dead  
so the door was opened to hunger and suffering,  
outside, the thick and strange movement

*of human life.*

*(Shadow Space 37)*

*Mahapatra's desire to write about his indigenous tradition and culture in the language of the coloniser, and yet create an independent identity, puts him on the front position of post-colonial poets in our country. To borrow a word from Raymond Williams, the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra is largely 'indicative', which talk about the issues of the contemporary society. The bitter realities of life force the poet to voyage inwards to seek his own self and meaning in life. This helped him to relocate himself. Mahapatra found this trait in Tagore. In this context, he draws our attention to Edwin Muir statement in the following lines:*

Our minds are possessed by three mysteries: where we came from, where we are going ... how we should live with one another.

*(qtd. in Door of Paper 71)*

Mahapatra left for the heavenly abode on August 27, 2023. His last wish was to burn his body in Khan Nagar electric crematorium, which is meant for the Hindus, and not bury his body in a coffin. The reason he stated in his last wish was that he would feel suffocated inside a coffin. This shows the childlike innocence of the great poet and his secular nature. His ashes might have mingled in the waters of Chandrabhaga, but his oeuvre will keep him immortal in the hearts of the readers. Odisha will always remain proud of this 'Son of the Soil'.

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